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THE FRENCH DECORATIVE STYLES

II. LOUIS XV

BY WALTER A. DYER

*Author of "The Lure of the Antique," "Early American Craftsmen,"
"Creators of Decorative Styles," etc.*

THE Louis XV period in France extended from 1715 to 1774 and produced a decorative style quite distinctive. During the eight years of the King's minority, Philippe de Bourbon or Philip of Orleans, acted as Regent, and these eight years are often referred to as the Regency Period.

Philip became the leader in matters of French decorative art, and it was he who laid the foundations for the Louis XV style. He took pleasure in upsetting traditions, and established an era of luxury and extravagance. In art as in life, formality was thrown overboard and gaiety took the place of the martial pomp of the previous reign.

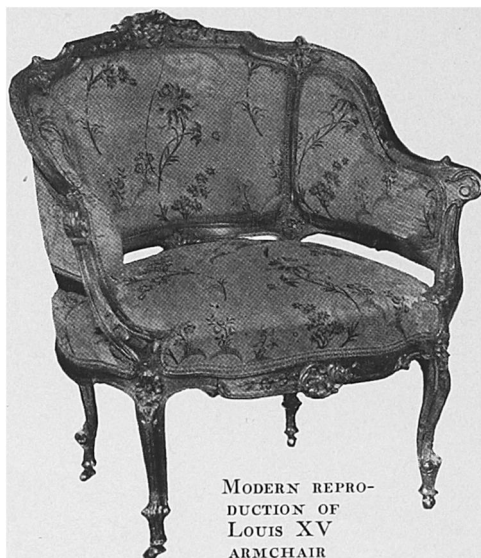
Under the Regent, Louis was brought up to a life of indulgence and ease in the midst of a pleasure-loving court, and it was only natural that his should be a gay and extravagant reign. Among his favorites were the Comtesse du Barry and Madame Pompadour, who helped to encourage the gaiety and luxury that affected all the styles of the period with which their names have always been closely connected.

In many respects it was not an effete period, however; it was far from barren of artistic results. Indeed, it was the most exuberant of the French decorative periods. The state ateliers continued to enjoy royal support and were the centers of artistic production.

The list of clever and talented masters of applied art

who flourished during this reign is too long to give in full. Interior decorators, designers, painters, potters, tapestry weavers, cabinetmakers and metal workers co-operated in an extraordinary manner to make this a most productive period. The designers of decorative sculpture exerted a dominating influence. Oudry and then Boucher became director of the Gobelins Tapestry Works, producing wonderful reproductions of paintings in which sylvan and amatory scenes took the place of the martial and classical subjects of the previous reign. Unfortunately for us, many of the delicate colors they used proved not to be permanent. Charles Cressent, who rose to prominence as a decorative sculptor during the Regency, was one of the best designers and cabinetmakers of the

century. Jean Riesener was another Louis XV cabinetmaker of prominence. Jacques Caffieri and Pierre Gouthière, skilful metal workers and cabinetmakers, added their part to the development of the styles. Lancret and Watteau, painters, embellished the walls and furniture of the period. Meissonnier, a designer, was a leader in the dominant rococo school. He defied the laws of balance, often making one side of a console or cabinet quite different from the other without disturbing the sense of harmony. His work is said to have greatly influenced the English Chippendale. And there were many other masters, including a host of interior decorators.



Courtesy of S. Karpen & Bros.

In 1753 Louis made a royal institution of the Sèvres porcelain factory, adding a new impetus in this field of applied art. Under Madame Pompadour Sèvres porcelain plaques were much used to enrich cabinets, writing-desks, etc.

It was during this reign, too, that the Martin family flourished, and Vernis-Martin lacquer became popular. The Martins were carriage painters who invented a lacquer finish in imitation of the popular Oriental lacquer, and then developed the more distinctly French Vernis-Martin. Simon Etienne Martin established the Vernis-Martin works in 1744. This lacquer was made in red, brown, gold, speckled bronze, and even black, and was used on many kinds of furniture, such as cabinets and elaborate sedan chairs. Watteau and Boucher painted pictures for these Vernis-Martin pieces and also for Vernis-Martin panels, overmantels and doors.

The later styles of the Louis XIV period gradually merged into those of Louis XV through the medium of the Regency. The taste for curves and rococo details had already made itself felt. The styles of the Louis XV period are marked, in general, by a greater suppleness in the lines of furniture, a more constant use of ornamental metal sculptures, rococo details, and the irregular harmony of related parts.

The Regency style was a medley of mythological, classic and modern, expressed with much parade and ostentation. The austere and heroic gave place to abandon frivolity and extravagance in decorative art. About 1720-25 a strong Chinese influence was felt, both in the increased use of lacquer and in some of the design details.

The Louis XV style proper, however, was a purely French development, built upon the Louis XIV, with very little foreign influence. It was a capricious, whimsical style, exaggerating the late Louis XIV forms, with a freer use of curves and rococo details. It was a less restrained style than that of Louis XIV, more elegant, and in some ways more graceful. Often, however, it lacked the merit of

the previous style when it carried its extravagance too far.

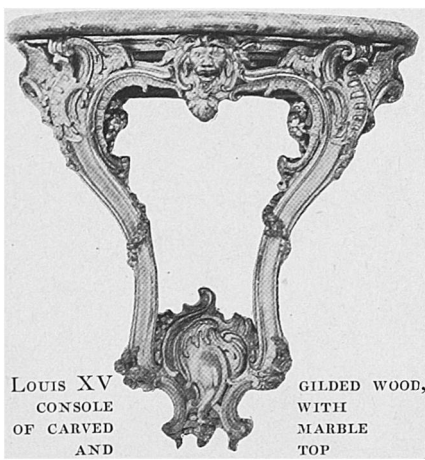
The dominant decorative motif was the rococo or rrocaille, used in irregular symmetry with skilful audacity. It was used in combination with ribbon and lace effects, natural flowers and hanging baskets, the broken shell, the twisted acanthus, the curled endive, and the flowing scroll. It was the master metal worker Caffieri who introduced the endive or celery motif to supplant the classic acanthus. Some stripes were employed, but less than in the succeeding reign.

As has been stated, the lack of precise balance in the use of ornament is a distinguishing mark of the Louis XV style. Unbalanced details were introduced during the Regency, and later, under the leadership of Meisonnier, all attempts to have the design alike on both sides of a given center were abandoned. Nevertheless, though the details were different, the effect of balance was retained by skilful arrangement of unlike sections.

These ornamental details were used lavishly in interior woodwork—on cornice, wainscot, mantel, door and window-casing, and panel and picture frame. Furniture was designed to conform with them. Plain surfaces were avoided, everything being profusely ornamented, chiefly with elaborate mounts of bronze and ormolu as well as carving.

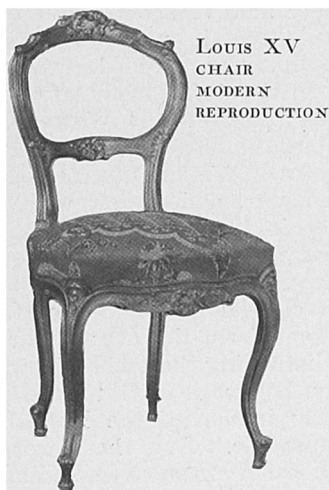
Toward the end of Louis XV's reign there was a slight reaction toward greater symmetry and simplicity, foreshadowing the style of Louis XVI.

The furniture of the Louis XV period reflected the spirit of the times both in form and in decoration. Many kinds of woods were used, including mahogany to some extent, as well as cherry and cheaper woods painted and gilded. Marquetry was not employed extensively, though we sometimes find inlay of tulip, rosewood, maple and amaranth on some of the larger pieces. The doors and panels of commodes, cabinets, etc., were often veneered, with the grain of the wood running diagonally. All the larger pieces were embellished with metal mounts and carved appliqué, most of it exhibiting superb workmanship.



LOUIS XV
CONSOLE
OF CARVED
AND
GILDED WOOD,
WITH
MARBLE
TOP

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

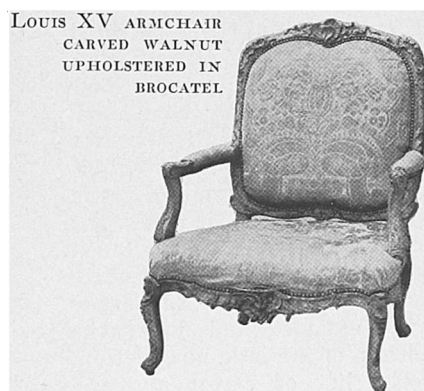


LOUIS XV
CHAIR
MODERN
REPRODUCTION

Courtesy of S. Karpen & Bros.

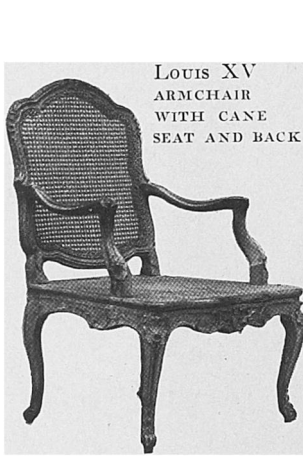


LOUIS XV
TABLE
OF POLISHED
OAK WITH
CARVING



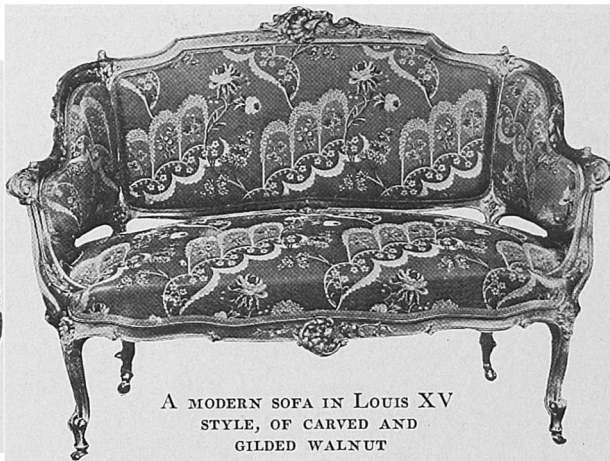
LOUIS XV ARMCHAIR
CARVED WALNUT
UPHOLSTERED IN
BROCADEL

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



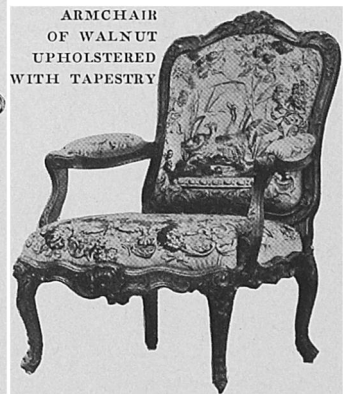
LOUIS XV
ARMCHAIR
WITH CANE
SEAT AND BACK

Metropolitan Museum of Art



A MODERN SOFA IN LOUIS XV
STYLE, OF CARVED AND
GILDED WALNUT

Courtesy of S. Karpen & Bros.



ARMCHAIR
OF WALNUT
UPHOLSTERED
WITH TAPESTRY

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Indeed, good workmanship was a characteristic of Louis XV furniture. While the chairs of the period were perhaps its most interesting product, there were many other noteworthy pieces in the typical style—tables and elaborately carved consoles, and wonderfully decorated cabinets and commodes. The boudoir was highly developed as a sort of informal reception room, and much care and skill were exercised in the development of its decoration and furnishing.

There were screens with carved and gilded frames surrounding specially woven floral and pictorial tapestries, also screens painted by Watteau and Boucher. Clocks, candelabra, mirrors, etc., were all designed in the extravagant style of the times.

Mirrors were introduced over mantels in place of the heavy carvings of the previous reign.

Panels were much in evidence on walls and ceilings, sometimes painted, sometimes to frame tapestries from the Gobelins or Beauvais factories, lovely in design and coloring, depicting pastoral scenes and love-making, contemporary life and Arcadian affectations. Overelaborate draperies were a feature of the interiors.

The Louis XV chair suggests comfort, ease and luxury. Curved shapes were in vogue, hardly an angle appearing in the chair frames.

A prolific and noteworthy period it was, but somewhat too florid, and from an artistic point of view it was surpassed by that which followed.

THE QUEEN ANNE COTTAGE A STUDY IN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

BY EDWARD B. ALLEN

OUR vagaries in architecture correspond quite closely with our heterogeneous population—ideas collected from all quarters of the globe are used to form as many styles (or lack of styles) as any one could well imagine.

When the last echoes of the Greek Revival epoch had died away and Classical ideas were forgotten, the Queen Anne cottage, so-called, came into vogue, enduring twenty years after the Civil War. This style acts as a middle or connecting period between the preceding Colonial and the crude designs which followed like architecture run mad.

The style was based on the stone and brick mansions of Queen Anne's time with a revival of the distinctly decorative Tudor arch and window

mouldings; but, reproduced as it was in this country only in wood, and in very diminutive proportions, produced frequently overornamental buildings that more resembled huge doll houses or candy houses of Christmas-tree fame than sober and simple dwellings. Still, some are almost beautiful and very effective.

Russell Sturgis says of this style, that quickly came and quickly went—after mentioning the true Queen Anne represented by St. Bride's Church and Greenwich Hospital and the single masterpiece of the time—Blenheim Palace—"the buildings which are especially associated with the style are the minor country houses and many houses in the suburbs of London, built frequently of red brick and characterized by sculptures in relief, moulded



HOUSE AT SOUTHVILLE, MASS.